Language vs. Literature: in English Departments in the Arab World

By Marwan M. Obeidat

Even though a large number of universities and colleges teach English and have attracted students from all over the Arab World, the attitude towards acknowledging the "English" tradition and the very concept of its role and purpose are changing drastically. At present, there is a heated debate about the issue in general: Are Arab students actually interested in learning language or literature? And how much literature (whether British or American) should be included in the curriculums? Further questions arise such as: What literature is appropriate, poetry or prose, modern or non-modern? Do we teach its history and cultural background, or do we simply teach the text itself (the words on the page)? Do we need to focus on the text as language or go beyond the text? Attempts to answer these questions generate great amounts of controversy.

On top of these unavoidably controversial questions is yet a more complex, challenging, and subtle question: Are not many of the cultural and social values embodied in the English literary tradition alien and opposed to the moral values held by Muslim Arab students? Or, in clearer terms, what kind of relationship is there between non-native literatures and the Arab students' moral character? The question will in turn lead to a cluster of other thematically related questions such as: Is it not rather risky to teach Arab students literature that poses a major moral, cultural, and social problem for English departments? What advantages are there in teaching a foreign literature? What moral effect (or effects) does a foreign literary text have on our students?

In answering these, together with other intellectually demanding questions of basically the same nature, some scholars in the Arab academy argue that when we introduce Western literature into English programs, we are, in effect, introducing a culturally superior, if somewhat threatening, subject that represents a world more powerful, more dominating, and more compelling than our own. And in this particular context, the English literary tradition is viewed by many people as belonging to a culture which has, in reality, colonized or dominated ours for substantially prolonged periods of time. Others think the very idea of teaching English literature is not an attempt towards a better understanding of the culture which it embodies, but, rather, towards spreading racist, reductionist, prejudiced, and hostile views that sharply conflict with the cultural and ethical codes of the students. In these circles, literature is viewed with suspicion as a subject culturally and socially unfit for the Arab university.

It is the purpose of this essay to address an on-going controversy in English departments of the universities of the Arab World on the respective roles of language and literature in teaching "English" to Muslim Arab students. This paper will review the case against literature, examine the actual teaching of language vs. literature in the Arab world, and finally make the case for teaching literature in the language classroom.

The Case Against Using Literature in the Classroom

As can be expected, there has been a relatively large number of research papers presented at various seminars, workshops, and conferences in the region criticizing the dominance of literature courses over language or linguistics courses, while bewailing the presence of foreign literature that obviously conflicts with the moral and cultural ethos of the students. Indeed, some linguists claim that the predominance of literature has been, in one way or the other, the cause of the failure of English departments in the Arab World to graduate competent students who are equipped not with literary knowledge but with linguistic training to meet the needs for English as a language of science, technology, business, and international communication. Surprisingly enough, linguists often question the role of English literature courses at the university level, a large number of whom argue that literature impedes the students' progress in language learning. In the linguists' view, what the students end up doing in the literature classes is "glossing vocabulary items."

There is a commonly held view that English departments in Third World universities have been dominated by the literature component of the curriculum at the expense of the needs, motives, and aspirations of the learner and his community. If we assume a three-way division for the curriculum into language, linguistics, and literature, it is generally assumed that the bulk of the curriculum in these departments consists of literature study.

In a 1987 study Muhammad Zughoul examined the curriculums of a number of English departments at Arab universities (the universities of Baghdad, Iraq; Damascus, Syria; Kuwait, Kuwait; Yarmouk, Jordan; Amman, Jordan) and the two American universities in the Middle East area. Professor Zughoul concluded that the curriculums of these departments (with the exception of the American University of Beirut) are heavily dominated by the literature component. Similar observations have been made about the rest of the Third World countries. In some of these countries, the study of English literature not only dominates the syllabus of the English department, but also shapes the syllabus of the secondary schools.

Elsewhere Professor Zughoul asserts that:

The other two components of the syllabus-language and linguistics-are clearly under represented in the curriculum, with the language component the weakest of all. It typically includes two courses in communication skills and a course in writing. Rarely does a department in a Third World country offer solid language training, i.e., training in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, term paper writing, or speech. It is assumed that the incoming student is proficient in the language and that he needs no further language training. This unrealistic assumption is, to a great extent, responsible for the failure of English departments in Third World countries to respond to the needs of the communities they are supposed to serve. (Zughoul 1986:11)

It is further affirmed that rarely does students' knowledge of English and American literature "become directly relevant to their work" following their graduation. And the assumption goes on to hold that students who graduate with a B.A. in English language and literature at any Arab university often go into the teaching profession, or, at best, into some clerical and administrative

work, whereas the graduate's knowledge of literature is hardly useful to him/her in anything whatsoever. Rather, it is his/her linguistic competence that is called upon in considerably demanding circumstances. It is concluded that the linguistic competence of the graduate student alone prepares him/her "to take a job to meet the needs of his/her (Arab) community." On the basis of given evidence, the knowledge of English language turns out to be completely separable from (not intertwined with) the knowledge of English and American literature.

That the language of literature deviates from natural or common language is axiomatic, a fact that leads Zughoul, and a few other like-minded linguists, to question "the validity of (the) inclusion (of literature) in the English department of a Third World country on a wide scale." The language of poetry (in particular) is dismissed by Zughoul as too deviant for his own as well as for other linguists' attention. Literature, then, uses language which is considerably different from the "normal" or "everyday" conversation of the common members of a speech community; it clearly uses language with greater care and complexity than the average user is able to produce. This makes it extremely difficult for teachers to explain literary texts of all kinds-poems, short stories, novels, and plays-when exposed to linguistic techniques which are supposed to simplify, reveal, or explain meaning.

The Case for Teaching Literature in the Classroom

Studies by researchers such as Mahmud Salih support the teaching of literature in the Arab world. Based on an analysis of questionnaires distributed among 118 Arab students majoring in English, Mahmud Salih writes the following:

The student survey shows that language skills seem to develop through studying literature in English. The positive impact of literature upon language skills is by no means novel, since students exercise or practice all of the skills in literature courses. During a literature class, they are required to listen to what an instructor is saying, they must jot down notes, they often ask or answer questions, and they are frequently required to read passages relevant to the idea(s) under consideration. (Salih 1986:25)

Observations of my students have confirmed Salih's findings. My students tend to agree that literature helps them acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners.

In order to test the conflicting claims regarding the place of literature in the curriculum in the Arab world, I examined the curriculums of the same English departments that Zughoul mentioned above as well as a few other departments at different Arab universities including the universities of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sultan Qaboos (Oman), King Saud (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia), Damascus, Tashreen, al- Ba th (Syria), Sfax, al-Kairouan (Tunisia), Mohamed Ben Abdellah (Meknes, Morocco), and Alexandria (Egypt). To my surprise, I

discovered that the number of courses offered in language and linguistics far outnumbered courses on literature in these curriculums! (See Figure 1 below).

This led me to conclude that, to the best of my knowledge, English departments of the universities of the Arab World are actually heavily dominated by the language and linguistics component more than by anything else! This turns out to be the exact opposite of what has been maintained by early publications and popular perceptions.

A close review of the English curriculums of the universities of the Arab World not only shows a lack of interest in English literature and, therefore, culture, but also reflects the degree to which literature in English departments in this part of the world has been pushed into the background. What is actually needed at this point is that English departments should endeavor to formulate a list of literature offerings, which, it is to be expected, will fulfill the needs of both faculty and students and simultaneously result in a more effective and systematic program than is currently available. In doing so, English departments would have to realize that the dimension of cultural knowledge, which knowing the tradition of literature in English creates, distinguishes university-level study of "English" from a mere ability to read, write, and speak the language properly and adequately. In my opinion, a knowledge of history and cultural background of the literature of England and the United States should, therefore, be the core of the degree which English departments offer. This goal, if ever realized on the part of English departments, will actually result in offering more literature courses to acquaint Arab students who learn English not just with the language as such, but also with the culture and tradition which it embodies.

As a specialist in literature, I support the view that literature, not language/linguistics is what is needed to help English departments upgrade their offerings and standards, on the one hand, and to streamline them with the Arab World's practical, albeit, pressing educational and cultural needs, on the other hand. The language-oriented courses lay the foundations for language proficiency-which is a fine task indeed-but which fail to provide actual exposure to the language at its best to help develop subtle and sophisticated language knowledge. Such courses, as Joseph John (1989) perceptively remarks, cannot provide students with much language competence, with an "awareness of the full range of its expressive potential."

Perhaps an example here can clarify the difference between grammatical competence and expressive potential. One major problem raised by the linguistic theory of Noam Chomsky is the "situation" of the meaning of sentences like the following:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

What we get here is a sequence of words that are considered acceptable on mere grammatical grounds, since it clearly responds to linguistic criteria, but it can hardly be considered an acceptable part of any meaningful discourse in standard varieties of the English language. It is, therefore, rather difficult to find a "reasonable" context in which that particular utterance could be used meaningfully.

However, literature specialists, readers, and literary critics would respond differently to any utterance that deviates from the expectations of normal usage of language as a means of

communication. The sentence which I have just quoted above is not too distinct from the type of language which we accept, and even appreciate in literature, highly suggestive literary statements such as:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
T. S. Eliot,

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
Or *The white nails of rain have dropped and the sun is free.*
Irving Layton,Berry Picking

In the sentences above the grammar, in so far as I can see, follows a normal pattern but in which hardly any of the form-words are associated in common ways. In our daily use of language we undoubtedly regard such unusual combinations of meaning as undesirable and try our best to avoid them. Indeed the effectiveness of language transcends mere grammatical correctness. The examples above show how insufficient a call for mere knowledge of the grammatical and other formal rules of language is. These hardly suffice to teach students, as Joseph John (1989) rightly asserts, "idiomatically sound, and therefore good, English." To put the matter in different terms, the preoccupation of many language specialists with grammar and phonology as a means of teaching students good English has, as a matter of fact, resulted in the "subordination of vocabulary teaching to grammar teaching," which in turn has led to an imbalance between grammar and lexis. But, as D. A. Wilkins perceptively points out, "while without grammar very little can be said, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins 1977:109). In other words, without immediate acquaintance with words and idioms in their actual context of literature, the formal knowledge of grammar and grammatical rules alone is futile, if not worthless!

A remarkable and basic distinguishing feature of literature which, as a matter of fact, must not go unnoticed is "imagination." Let us return for a moment to the quotation cited above by T. S. Eliot. In this particular context, it will be sufficient to say that the meaning is not confined to that of fantasy or even to the creation of fictional characters and narratives which never have any real existence. It indicates that the linguistic utterance which carries imagination has a kind of quality that lies beyond the conventional use of words to convey acceptable meaning. Works of art may offer us information of one kind or another; they may, and probably do, have a realistic and "meaningful" substance that can be paraphrased in so many ways. But such a paraphrase will obviously have less to offer or say than the original work; it will indeed be "thinner" and it may deviate from the original text. In a word, studying literature may be possible without linguistic analysis; it requires literary criticism-but that is another story. To reduce a literary text to a meaning is to obliterate its thematic and indicative ramifications.

The best way to approach literature is, rather, to ask how "the meanings of literary works are possible (i.e., made or formed)," to use Jonathan Culler's words.

But, then, how applicable are the "fruitless linguistic trees" and the semantic, syntactic, morphological, and phonological rules, principles, functions, theories, and structures to the pressing needs of a graduate whose major field of study is English language and who has yet to find himself/herself a job as a high-school teacher, or a translator, or even a diplomat, for that matter?

As we teach Arab students English literature, we should also teach them how to read closely and critically, and supply them with proper analytical skills as we open the door to a deeper appreciation and understanding of literature, both as an object of ideological and cultural analysis, and as a linguistic activity of reading and writing about "the other." Obviously, instructors will shoulder more responsibility in choosing and teaching literary texts, and their job will be even harder in trying to avoid the religious, moral, and cultural barriers that British and American literature pose. But, in spite of these barriers, it is still our hope to graduate experts, not simply in the English language as such, but in the foreign cultures which it embodies. These experts would be able to help us better understand foreign peoples and their respective cultures in an age filled with a massive influx of knowledge and education.

In fact, the same criticisms leveled at the teacher of literature could be used against the teacher of linguistics or mere language. One could question the overall usefulness of a knowledge of grammatical and linguistic rules. How does language training per se serve the needs of the community in a similar manner, or is mere accuracy in phonology, syntax, patterns of discourse, and grammatical sequences reason enough to justify teaching language?

It is the argument of this paper that the inadequacies of teaching of linguistics can be overcome if Arab and non Arab-learners are exposed to English literature through various forms of writing including fiction, poetry, drama, and the essay. That alone can make up for the deficiencies, if not narrowness, of the language and linguistics courses. As Joseph John aptly puts it, "a student of linguistics learns about language, while a student of literature learns language as used in poetry, drama, fiction, or any other genre..In one case, the experience is derivative and remote; in the other, it is direct and immediate" (John 1986:19). Literature should not and cannot be taught solely for a linguistic purpose as some prefer to propose. For literature has much more to offer than language would normally do, since it has greater freedom and since it acknowledges no linguistic barriers that restrain our ability to use language. But it would be unfortunate to regard it as valuable only in connection with the study of linguistics. N. Minnis (1971:252) rightly affirms: "No linguist should ever hope to explain the aesthetic values of literature by linguistic investigation any more than the values of great music can be explained simply by a careful examination of the score." To be sure, literature is the art that uses language which may, perhaps, be capable of linguistic investigation. But to regard it simply as a subject of linguistic analysis is a premature judgement-even though students have a lot to gain from its quality and excellence. In no case, I assume, can we apply linguistic techniques to literary texts; if we do so, we will not be studying texts, but we will be analyzing their language instead, leaving the texts aside.

What I am trying to say here is that linguistic methods and concepts may serve some values in literature, but (by no means) can they replace or supersede these values. For even when we apply the linguistic model to literature, we appear to be doing an improper and rather awkward thing. If literature can, after all, be considered as linguistic, what is the point of examining it in the light

of a linguistic model? It would be a ludicrous mistake to identify literature as language. It is true that literature uses language as its medium, but this does not mean that the structure of literature is identical with the structure of language. The literary structure does not and cannot coincide with that of language.

Conclusion

It must, in conclusion, be emphasized that this is a highly controversial subject, and my own study does not pretend to give all the answers; indeed, the very nature of the language- literature controversy does not encourage anyone to claim to know all the answers. What has been attempted here is simply a rationale for including literature in the classroom. Learning to ask the right sort of questions is undoubtedly the most important part of academic study. Throughout this article I have endeavored to suggest that linguistics and literature are two different fields of knowledge, which illuminate one another in very limited ways. In my opinion, each discipline cannot substitute for the other by any educated analogy. Some linguists, like Zughoul, prefer not to offer literature courses to Arab learners of English because they believe that such courses impede the student's progress towards language learning. It has been my aim to provide a substantive argument against this view, suggesting that literature (and not anything else) upgrades the students' ability to read, write, and speak proper English. Aside from the constructive role that literature plays in improving the students' language skills, it is a pivotal means for honing the students' open- mindedness, giving them real opportunities to be exposed to foreign cultures and foreign peoples.

As Joseph John suggests, language and linguistics courses are primarily concerned with the theoretical aspects of language, and their only function is to provide the student with a knowledge of the linguistic rules and principles, a knowledge which, to some degree, restrains the students' use of language-more or less. In fact, literary awareness provides extra features that help improve the students' command of English and ability to use language freely, not solely as a linguistic, but as a cultural, intellectual, social, and psychological medium of expression. As a matter of fact, John goes on to argue, linguists would want students to learn about rather than learn the language. Exercises which concentrate on learning about the language would turn students into passive recipients rather than creative producers of language.

Thus, not only does literature provide the student with a considerably wide variety of syntax and vocabulary, but it also exposes the student to language used at its best. Since, on the basis of given empirical evidence, literature has a very effective and subtle impact on the students' language skills and linguistic performance, students should not, therefore, be forbidden to study it. For it is only from literature that the student can obtain the skills he/she needs. Accordingly, it should follow that the more literature courses we have, the greater the chance will be for students in the English programs of Arab universities not only to improve, but hopefully to be able to use English impeccably.

I suggested the following quotation from Roland Barthes to Mahmud Husein Salih a long while ago when he was writing his own article, "From Language to Literature in University English

Departments," and, I think, it is worth using one more time: "Linguistics can give literature the generative model which is the principle of all science, since it is a matter of making use of certain rules to explain particular results." In commenting on this passage, M. Salih (1989:27) writes: "but literature, of which language is a major component, highlights the supremacy (of literariness) over all (other types of) linguistic activities." To that conclusion I consent.

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Figure 1

THE FOLLOWING IS A SELECTED LIST OF ARAB UNIVERSITIES
WITH THE TYPE OF COURSE REQUIRED FOR A BA
IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.

university	literature	language/linguistics	percentage literature
Yarmouk University (Jordan)	8	27	23
University of Bahrain	7	27	21
Qatar University	6	28	18
Kuwait University	12	14	46
Sultan Qaboos University (Oman)	13	18	42
United Arab Emirates University	10	25	29
Total	56	139	29